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Research Note

Documenting Religious Responses to 3.11 on Film

This research note discusses the challenges of post-disaster filmmaking and introduces two short films about religious responses to the 11 March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Japan that were produced to accompany this special issue. The first clip presents perspectives on the cherry blossom festival at Jōnenji, a Pure Land Buddhist temple that functioned as an evacuation center in the tsunami-stricken city of Kesennuma. Volunteers started the festival in 2012, and it has since grown into a major annual event that, besides commemorating the tragic events of 3.11, provides an important opportunity for recreation. The second vignette examines the training of *rinshō shūkyōshi*, literally “clinical religious specialists,” or “interfaith chaplains,” at Tohoku University in Sendai. As the video shows, this program, which comprises a distinctive collaboration of religious and nonreligious aid providers, has contributed to a shifting image of religion in Japan’s public sphere. Instructors and students may find the audiovisual component useful in discussing different intersections of religion and relief in contemporary Japan and as a means of exploring practical and theoretical dimensions of religious responses to disaster. The vignettes can be streamed or downloaded for free from Vimeo. Vignette One (Jōnenji): <https://vimeo.com/141396760> and Vignette Two (Interfaith Chaplains): <https://vimeo.com/141380269>.

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A ZIGZAG of laundered bed sheets, shirts, and pants hanging out to dry obstructed my view of Jōnenji when I first entered the temple's driveway in early May 2011. Eight weeks had passed since the 11 March earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent fires destroyed large parts of Kesennuma, yet dozens of the three hundred survivors who found shelter at Jōnenji's main hall had not yet found a different place to stay, nor found ways to cope with the loss of their loved ones, their homes, or their livelihoods. People in Northeast Japan were still searching for family photos and missing bodies in the debris. They were also dealing with me, a Tokyo-based graduate student doing fieldwork and asking people to undergo interviews about the destruction of their former lives for a documentary film.

Here I will outline the challenges I faced capturing the unfolding 3.11 disasters, as I draw on my research at Jōnenji. Though it is not designed as a pragmatic guide, it is my hope that ethnographers of disaster may find this section useful. I address matters that I wish I had known about before I first entered the tsunami zone, providing an account of Jōnenji's role as an evacuation center in the wake of 3.11. Pulling at the threads of fieldwork ethics, as I shall discuss, unravels complex problems pertaining to post-disaster research and filmmaking. I found myself in the position of violating people's privacy and asking them to talk in uncomfortable ways about their personal calamities. Building connections with informants involved the risk of getting hurt and hurting others. I suggest that similar difficult yet ultimately educational opportunities may arise in any type of fieldwork. Reflecting on the ethical choices I made while filming the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake may therefore be relevant to fieldwork generally, beyond the utility of these reflections as a means of understanding post-disaster, religion-related aid initiatives.

In order to provide background on the two short films that accompany this special issue, I first introduce the Jōnenji cherry blossom festival, which grew out of the temple's function as an emergency shelter. Pure Land Buddhist priests, who rushed to mobilize aid for survivors at the temple in 2011, organized the festival in 2012. The festival has since grown into an annual event that involves the local community and volunteers from across Japan. After this, I discuss the training of *rinsō shūkyōshi*, literally "clinical religious specialists," or "interfaith chaplains," at Tohoku University in Sendai. The second video examines this program's distinc-

tive collaboration of religious and nonreligious aid providers—scholars, medical doctors, and religious professionals—and introduces ways this collaboration contributed to a shifting image of religion in Japan’s public sphere. I consider how this training plays out within the lives of graduates, one of whom has since secured significant revision of the rules and regulations for care providers, and I suggest that investigation of post-disaster initiatives like the “interfaith chaplain” program may yield further insights into how religion in Japan transforms in the midst of demographic change, rural depopulation, and related challenges.

The Jōnenji cherry blossom festival vignette, filmed in 2015, explores religious responses to 3.11 in Japan through the lens of an ongoing independent grassroots initiative run by priests and lay volunteers in support of one particular temple and its surrounding local community in the disaster zone. As the video illustrates, the festival offers all attendees a ludic zone created by enjoyable activities, free food, and games for children—one that includes a Buddhist memorial service. The festival’s interplay of recreational and commemorative components express and reinforce the post-disaster identity of the temple and its community. As it is an annual event, the festival exhibits the potential to stabilize the rhythms of everyday life after the tsunami. Rather than the recreational activities themselves, which are common in temple festivals, what distinguishes this particular event are the participating groups and the longevity of their collaboration. While the festival is new compared to traditional festivals like the *obon* summer festival of the dead, which has probably been celebrated at Jōnenji since the seventeenth century when the first graves were erected at the temple, the post-disaster cherry blossom celebration is remarkably long-lasting when compared to other post-3.11 volunteer efforts. It sets the stage for a continuous exchange between members of the local community and volunteers from across Japan, and it reflects and makes visible complex relationships between providers and recipients of aid as it provides an opportunity for participants to shape and sustain these bonds in creative ways. The festival is an arena within which a renegotiation of post-disaster legitimacy, authority, and power takes place through fun, games, and commemoration under the cherry blossoms.

Sustainability and perseverance in the face of adversity are important themes in both the Jōnenji cherry blossom festival vignette and the short film about the training of “interfaith chaplains” at Tohoku University in Sendai. An obvious difference between both initiatives is that they operate on different scales. The Jōnenji festival emphasizes the role of the local temple as a “place of action,” or *genba*, to use a Japanese term often employed in this context. The chaplaincy program grew out of a large-scale, multi-faith relief network and is based at a public higher educational institution. While the Jōnenji vignette underlines the significance of Buddhist temples as stable emergency evacuation centers and venues for recreational activities for the local community, the training of chaplains at Tohoku University essentially prepares religious professionals to leave their temples and churches, thereby opening numerous new *genba* as they pursue their vocations in temporary housing units, hospitals, hospices, and through home care. In its

multi-sitedness and practical exploration of “spiritual care” in public spaces and healthcare facilities, the interfaith chaplaincy program responds to a wide range of social challenges beyond the impact of 3.11 in Japan, including urbanization and the depopulation of rural areas, changing family structures, challenges associated with Japan’s aging society, and the transformation of burial practices.¹

CHALLENGES OF POST-DISASTER RESEARCH AND FILMMAKING

My research at Jōnenji would have never been possible without Shōji Yoshiaki as my guide through the early stages of my research on Buddhist responses to the 3.11 disasters. Shōji, a Pure Land Buddhist priest from Shiogama, near Sendai, worked tirelessly to organize relief efforts across the disaster zone, which extended over hundreds of kilometers along the Pacific coast. He knew which tunnels were closed, which roads were passable, and which temples were damaged. Shōji’s participation in funeral rituals for disaster victims, among them members of his parish community, had slowed but not stopped by late April 2011, when we first met at his temple Unjōji in Shiogama. My goal was to focus my research on Shōji’s relief efforts, which involved the distribution of children’s books and pencils, among other goods. Jōnenji, the only Pure Land temple in Kesennuma, was the last stop on our second joint tour to Buddhist temples in the disaster zone.

During this early phase of my research, I limited my interview requests to Shōji, some of his fellow priests, and a few of his parishioners. I also interviewed scholars of religion. But I avoided conversations about the disasters with survivors who were not acquainted with my main informants. In August 2011, for example, an elderly resident approached my film team in the devastated community of Rikuzentakata, where I had also filmed in early May. The man was excited to learn about our project and even pointed me to an elevated spot where a foreign television film team had marked out a tripod position for a good shot across the coast. He showed no intention of keeping a critical distance. I maintained distance by not asking him for an interview in front of a camera. To make this clear, in Rikuzentakata I filmed the destruction of the former lives of thousands in a single pan shot, capturing a place where more than 1,700 people died in the tsunami. Yet I feared one helpful resident’s rejection. Perhaps more than this, I feared hurting him with questions about his loss. Instead, I kept asking scholars and priests for interviews, most of whom I had just met for the first time. But was I requesting interviews, or was I seeking their permission to zoom in on the destruction of their former lives? Was I capitalizing on their suffering? What were the unintended consequences of my films? Whatever the consequences, they let me stay in their homes, they shared their food with me, and they helped me with my work.

It is important to consider the constellation of conditions that led to these interviews and self-reflexive questions. I was conducting fieldwork in Tokyo when the disaster struck. I was trained to examine Buddhism on the ground, and I was prepared to shoot a documentary film about Zen Buddhism with Jakob Montrasio that summer. I was unaffected by the disasters, yet close enough to meet

colleagues and Buddhist priests in the disaster zone, which put me in a good position for interviews and field observations. Electricity and gas had been restored by late April, and food and gasoline were available. My work did not obstruct the work of aid providers, from what I could observe. There was a risk in entering the disaster zone, but I made this step by choice. Once in the disaster-afflicted area, I no longer had to ponder whether I should go there or not. Excitement alternated with fear of radiation exposure and aftershocks, but I experienced those same fears in Tokyo. I actually felt safer in the disaster zone than in my apartment in Tokyo, where I was alone, and where low rent came with poor safety standards. In Tokyo, I felt safest sleeping with my clothes on, knowing that I was usually the first to run to the front door when a quake struck. While I never saw my Tokyo neighbors, I would sometimes hear their front doors close soon after an aftershock.

The overall chaos of the disaster zone, perhaps ironically, found expression in a very forgiving and mostly lighthearted mood that prevailed among the people in the region. However, the fact remained that I hardly knew my informants when I first interviewed them, and they hardly knew me. For this reason alone I was glad to return to Japan in late 2013 for one year of follow-up study at Tohoku University. It was during this time that unexpected discussions of personal calamity became more frequent in my conversations with disaster victims—even in conversations with people I had never met before. While I could not possibly grasp the suffering of traumatized survivors in any real way, complications arose when I neglected my own problems and needs by devaluing them in comparison with the existential dilemmas that faced disaster victims. Self-deprecation only impeded my ability to handle stress, and it widened the gap between the informants and myself. When I played down my own difficulties, I deprived them of the opportunity to be anything other than victims. I was fortunate to have disaster-experienced counselors and priests as informants, who shared their insights without my prompting. I took their occasional hints as invitations for open discussions about life and work in a disaster zone, and these discussions included talk about my own behavior and feelings. Talking about these matters furthered my fieldwork skills. These discussions were in fact required as a means for me to build connections with the people I met.

Issues pertaining to research ethics are by no means limited to an ethnography of disaster (McLAUGHLIN 2010, 18–19), but work in the aftermath of emergencies poses unpredictable risks of getting hurt or hurting others. In the case of Jōnenji after the tsunami, as I indicated above, even the unassuming act of walking across the temple's front yard for an appointment with the priests involved the risk of invading other people's privacy, or whatever was left of it. The refugees at Jōnenji were by no means only temple parishioners or clergy. I refrained from filming at Jōnenji while the temple functioned as a refuge center, and instead focused on scenes of destruction that seemed "impersonal," such as piles of rubble. Similar film footage circulated on the news worldwide. But filming rubble was no less challenging, in that it meant filming the pieces of the former lives of disaster victims, perhaps even bodies buried in debris. Empty spaces were no safe zone either.

Filming empty landscapes meant filming the absence of human life, and the loss of what people called home.

Violation of privacy was a significant consequence of the material destruction, and so was discussion of personal calamity in conversations with people in evacuation centers and temporary housing units. By early May 2011, some of the bereaved at Jōnenji had only just begun to open up and talk about their experience with Buddhist priests from outside areas who offered counseling services at Jōnenji and at other emergency shelters nearby. One survivor lost her husband. He drove her to Jōnenji after the earthquake, but then drove to their steel-framed three-story house, which he had built to keep his family safe after witnessing the destructive force of the 2010 Chile tsunami. He drowned in the attempt to save valuables in his garage. Another refugee at Jōnenji was told by her physically challenged husband to run and leave him behind. Head priest Takahashi Seikai recounted that the woman seemed absent and was unable to speak more than a word at a time for several months after the disaster.²

When I returned to Kesenuma with my film team in August 2011 to record interviews with head priest Takahashi Seikai and his daughter Takahashi Issei, Jōnenji no longer functioned as an evacuation center. The priests were unable to contact the members of all two hundred parishioner families who had lost their homes, and who were now living in temporary housing units across Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures. The move from evacuation shelters to temporary housing units exacerbated the loss of control endured by disaster victims who had lost their homes, and who had no choice but to move to the places they were assigned to live. Nearly five years after the tsunami, about one hundred households affiliated with Jōnenji are still living in temporary housing, mostly under trying circumstances. The others were able to rebuild their homes or moved to other cities, some as far away as Tokyo.³

Takahashi Seikai passed away between the filming of our feature-length documentary and when I revisited Jōnenji in March 2014 to present the results of our work in a Japanese-language version of *Buddhism after the Tsunami*.⁴ I knew about the death of the head priest in September 2013 and had tried to prepare for the moment of crossing Jōnenji's front yard again. I brought the priest's family flowers and a copy of the film on DVD. First, I would give an introductory talk about our film, or so I thought, and then we could watch it. Takahashi Issei, Seikai's daughter and heir to the temple's leadership, greeted me with tea, and took a seat in the place where her father had offered us tea and sweets more than two-and-a-half years ago when we filmed him—next to the family's household altar, which now graced his portrait photo. She seemed relaxed. Her son ran back and forth between the family's living quarters and the temple every minute or so to show me his collection of action figures. It was lunchtime, and members of the Takahashi family, parishioners, and part-time staff were chatting next door.

Takahashi Issei offered me a box lunch. We talked about the weather and the challenges she faced taking over her father's duties as head priest before I changed the subject to our film. Just as I was wondering where she had put the DVD that I

had given her, I heard the theme to our documentary begin as the group of people next door started to watch the film. I felt trapped: all I wanted to do was stop the film, but I was closed out, until the slide door jumped open once again moments later. It was the boy, who stormed in as if to check if his mother was safe. He turned around cheerfully, as if to not miss the story of his grandfather Takahashi Seikai, who had tried to call his daughter after the earthquake. Whatever the consequences, the door stayed open that day.

THE JŌNENJI CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

Ono Jōhō, Shimada Eka, and Katō Ken'ichi, the three main organizers of the Jōnenji cherry blossom festival, were among the first to mobilize support for Jōnenji in the wake of the 11 March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. These three Pure Land Buddhist priests from Tokyo managed to reach Kesennuma by early April, at a time when people in the disaster zone relied on relief goods and civic engagement from outside areas. Neighbors in Kesennuma supported each other by sharing their food and water supplies, and Jōnenji pitched in as well. The temple's stock of sweets and candles for memorial services were much sought-after. However, Jōnenji was not registered as a designated evacuation center due to the constitutional separation of religion and state. Since officials could only guess about the whereabouts of refugees, complications arose in the delivery of relief goods, so coordination between the temple and government agencies was poor.

Volunteer priests engaged in “mundane” activities by bringing food and daily necessities to temples like Jōnenji, where hundreds of survivors suffered through hunger and cold. Priests also helped with cleanup and reconstruction work, besides participating in activities that were more “religious” in a narrower sense, through ritual participation in funerals and memorial services, or by offering counseling sessions. Religious and nonreligious aid providers participated in similar activities to compensate for the state's ineptitude in crisis management, as was the case in previous crisis moments, notably in the crisis year of 1995 after the Great Hanshin earthquake (MULLINS and NAKANO 2016, 1–4).⁵

Religious and nonreligious aid providers in 2011 were distinguished by their networks. Temple Buddhist priests were able to mobilize material and spiritual support quickly and efficiently through local parish networks, neighborhood ties, temple support associations (known as *kō* in Japanese), regional and nationwide sectarian youth associations (*seinenkai*), sectarian disaster relief offices, and informal yet invaluable temple-to-temple connections. These networks enabled long-term relief initiatives. The Jōnenji cherry blossom festival video shows how these networks generated action. For example, the parishioners of Pure Land Buddhist temples in Oita in Kyushu, some 1,400 kilometers away from Kesennuma, collected and donated two tons of rice in 2015, which the priests from Oita then distributed to the locals in Kesennuma, relying on Jōnenji as a hub. However, it is important to mention that these and most other priests who rushed to offer help at Jōnenji were not acquainted with the priests at Jōnenji before the disasters.

The three main initiators of the festival from Tokyo knew each other via their participation in a counseling research group for suicide prevention. They had learned about Jōnenji's role as an emergency evacuation center via sectarian channels. They belonged to the same Buddhist denomination, but they were not affiliated with Jōnenji before they decided to drive to Kesennuma to determine what kinds of goods and services were needed. It was within this mobilization of aid that a lasting friendship developed between Takahashi Issei and the volunteers. The volunteers allocated work so that relief goods and counseling services were available until the temple shelter closed in June 2011.

As refugees moved from the temple into temporary housing, they severed crucial local community ties. It was at this point that the volunteers' idea of starting a new festival took on a new importance. The cherry blossom festival provided an occasion for survivors and volunteers to reunite at Jōnenji and to commemorate the temple's role as an emergency shelter in a positive, recreational environment. Hosting the festival during the cherry blossom season in April, rather than March, allowed for ludic activities outdoors. Doing so furthermore queued the festival into the annual cycle of the cherry blossom season. According to head priest Takahashi Issei, this was intentional, since the cherry blossom in its ephemeral beauty symbolizes death as much as it invites festivalgoers to enjoy life while it lasts.⁶ Attendance increased gradually, from about 130 festival visitors in 2012 to over 300 guests in 2015, among them parishioners, survivors who lived at Jōnenji when it functioned as an emergency shelter, neighbors, and local supporters of the temple. The number of volunteers has also increased over the years as more and more priests and lay volunteers take part in the festivities. In 2015, the program included games for kids, a performance of Indian dance, the making of *mochi* rice cakes, food, drinks, and a Buddhist memorial service. A barbecue was organized by members of the Kannon group, a local Jōnenji-affiliated *kō*—a lay confraternity, or support association. Members of the group hold regular meetings at Jōnenji's Kannon-*dō*, a temple building dedicated to the Bodhisattva Kannon. The group consisted of male parishioners of Jōnenji in their fifties to eighties whose families have been connected with the temple for generations.

While collaboration between volunteers from outside areas and members of the local Jōnenji Kannon group is driven by the idea of enabling a recreational opportunity for the local community, the festival also opens up important venues for volunteers and local supporters to rekindle connections forged after the disaster, and longstanding community ties that were compromised in 2011. The day before the festival is of particular importance for the volunteers, and the festival's end marks the beginning of a closed meeting of the local Kannon group over drinks and food. Head priest Takahashi Issei and vice head priest Takahashi Honkai of Jōnenji participate in both of these related events.

On the day before the festival in April 2015, about thirty volunteers, most of them Pure Land Buddhist priests from across Japan, gathered at Jōnenji in the afternoon to immediately begin with festival preparations on site. In the evening, all attending volunteers and head priest Takahashi Issei gathered at the temple's big

reception room to celebrate the *otenki matsuri*, or “weather festival.” Local custom in the Tohoku region has it that collective drinking on the day before an event brings good weather. The party involved a round of introductions, since not all participants knew one another. For the majority of attendants, however, this was a reunion. Expressions of joy and excitement filled the air. Memories of 3.11 blended with discussions about the festival’s history, purpose, and future. Team discussions of the festival schedule started around 10 p.m. and lasted for more than an hour before the volunteers moved to the main hall to sleep—a scene reminiscent of the time when Jōnenji functioned as an emergency shelter. The volunteers resumed preparations in the early morning of 26 April, when other volunteers and members of the local Kannon group joined to set up tents, sound gear, and the barbecue. The volunteers and local supporters handled most of the preparations by themselves from this point, as Takahashi Issei and Takahashi Honkai were caught up in preparations for a funeral.⁷ The festival’s preparation transitioned smoothly into the festival itself, as more and more guests arrived, until the festival came to an end at around 3 p.m. with a last round of barbecue for the volunteers. The dismantling of tents by volunteers was almost completed by this point.

As a participant observer, I found the atmosphere surrounding this final stage of the festival to be very important, because it intensified the exchange between members of the local Kannon group and volunteers from outside areas. The closer the festival came to its end, the more interactions between the members of different groups took place. Most of the neighbors and members of the local community had left by that time. The absence of guests and the invitation to have a last round of barbecue before the long ride home encouraged communication between volunteers, who had observed the Kannon group’s activities from a respectful distance, and the Kannon group members. The members included local farmers and fishermen. One of them, a former fisherman, worked as a firefighter during the tsunami aftermath. He now worked as a carpenter. The fathers of the members of the group had met at Jōnenji before them. It was not the 3.11 disasters that made them form a group to support each other and their temple, but multi-generational local community ties. Long-term social change, especially rural depopulation and the decline of the fishery and agricultural industries, had destabilized these ties over decades as younger people moved to bigger cities for jobs. Members of the Kannon group characterize themselves as protectors of their local community, with Jōnenji as their anchor. In the wake of 3.11, members of the group transformed their Kannon sub-temple into a temporary morgue as they aided survivors who took refuge in the main hall. Their practical skills ranged from cooking and fixing machines to emergency surgery. Though rarely expressed by disaster victims in the Tohoku area, support from outside areas was not always free of complications. In some cases, volunteers took away local jobs, by offering free haircuts for example, while major reconstruction contracts went to companies based in Japan’s political and economic centers. Among the volunteers who came to the disaster zone in the wake of the 3.11 disasters were many who just came to have a look at the disaster

zone. Providers of care expected to be cared for in return in some cases, or to be indulged as if they were close friends.

Volunteers who returned to the disaster zone to engage in long-term relief initiatives risked resentment from some locals who felt marginalized. At the same time, it appeared that local supporters began to appreciate these returning volunteers in new ways. Locals opened up to them and expressed their views and concerns. At the end of the 2015 Jōnenji cherry blossom festival, for example, a member of the local Kannon group complained in frank terms that his local group never received the group photos that volunteers had taken in previous years. This complaint was a response to the fact that volunteers had gathered for a group photo so quickly after the cleanup in 2015 that the first volunteers had already left by the time the members of the Kannon group were informed that a group photo was being taken. While this complaint had a serious undertone, the local supporter presented it in an entertaining way, by inviting all remaining people to take photos of him alone in front of the large main hall. This performance not only entertained and fascinated the mostly younger volunteers who were still around but also educated them and made them feel accepted.

Opportunities for recreation matter, especially in times when people die of what has come to be called *shinsai kanrenshi*, “disaster-related deaths,” due to stress and exhaustion.⁸ The Jōnenji cherry blossom festival enables much-needed recreation. The festival creates a manageable space under adverse circumstances, in a situation that is otherwise subject to the trauma of the 3.11 disasters and community-altering demographic changes. The temple’s festival allows participants to negotiate boundaries, to enjoy food and games, and to let go of grief and stress within a welcoming and forgiving environment. While locals appreciate the support of volunteers, they feel compelled to give back to the volunteers by contributing to the festival, and this exchange of obligations strengthens community ties. At the same time, younger priests and lay volunteers from urban areas may take home with them memories of Jōnenji as a *genba* with powerful community ties, where people visit their temple regularly, as a meeting space and local anchor. The Jōnenji cherry blossom festival allows for all participating groups to explore their identities, to express themselves, to reunite, and to reflect on their actions with open-mindedness and humor.

TRAINING “INTERFAITH CHAPLAINS” AT TOHOKU UNIVERSITY

After the 11 March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters in Japan, religious activists embarked on new spiritual care initiatives. “Spiritual care,” the category that is described most frequently in discussions of post-disaster treatment initiatives, seeks to address the individual beliefs and needs of recipients. This type of care can involve a wide range of practices, such as attentive listening (*keichō*), sutra chanting, prayer rituals for this-worldly benefits, and even exorcisms performed for those who believe themselves possessed by the spirits of the dead. The religious beliefs and practices of the providers of care, however, come into play only by request of the clients. Clients (as spiritual care recipients are gener-

ally called by the caregivers) do not necessarily understand themselves as religious (GRAF 2016, 168). Since the 3.11 disasters, Tohoku University has led the development of spiritual care by collaborating on a relief project called the Kokoro no Sōdanshitsu, or “Spirit Counseling Center.” The center was initiated by the medical palliative care specialist Okabe Ken, who himself died of cancer on 27 September 2012, shortly after the center’s founding. Since 2012, Tohoku University has trained *rinsō shūkyōshi*, literally “clinical religious specialists,” or “interfaith chaplains,” in collaboration with religious professionals, scholars, and medical doctors.

Taniyama Yōzō, who is professor of Practical Religious Studies at Tohoku University and a Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land Buddhism) priest trained in Vihāra care for the dying, ranks among the most influential leaders of the Spirit Counseling Center and its affiliated training of “interfaith chaplains.”⁹ This initiative sought to respond to the needs of disaster victims initially, but has since expanded to contribute to society at large. As the second short video demonstrates, the Spirit Counseling Center and other multi-religious relief collaborations have elicited notably favorable media coverage of Buddhism in Japan, especially when compared with the media coverage of religious responses in the crisis year of 1995.¹⁰ In the wake of 3.11, a focus on “spiritual care,” rather than “religion,” enabled reporters to focus on socially engaged aspects of Buddhism in practice without appearing “religious” themselves or in favor of any particular teaching or sect. As the vignette illustrates, Taniyama prefers a form of religious care that welcomes participation in the practices of different religions without presupposing belief in that religion. By encouraging religious practitioners to take part in one another’s rituals, and to learn about faiths other than their own, spiritual care initiatives have developed into important venues for interfaith understanding.

I conducted participant observation at three *rinsō shūkyōshi* training programs in 2013 and 2014. Nineteen applicants were selected for enrolment in the fifth training program for clinical religious specialists, which took place between May and July 2014. Fifteen participants were Buddhist priests of various established Buddhist denominations in Japan. The other four participants were members of two Christian denominations—the Japan Baptist Convention and The Japan Church of the Nazarene—and two “new religions,” Risshō Kōsei-kai and Tenrikyō. The practical training took place either at the Café de Monk, a mobile counseling café that visits temporary housing units in the disaster zone and also functions as a training venue for “interfaith chaplains,” at a food radioactivity measurement station in Sendai called Inori (literally “Prayer”), at the Spirit Counseling Center’s telephone counseling service, and at one of eight selected Vihāra institutions, hospices, and clinics. For many *rinsō shūkyōshi* trainees I talked to, practicing their religion and spiritual care outside their familiar environment by entering new *genba*, or places of action, was a life-enriching experience, and so was the aspect of multi-religious collaboration. Most participants had little to no experience interacting with members of other religions.

While contact with clients and patients comprises an important experience in the training of “interfaith chaplains,” I found it important to focus the vignette

on mostly neglected ways in which multi-religious collaboration forms a type of “spiritual care” for religious specialists themselves. As the short film demonstrates, trainees’ understandings of their own individual and sectarian identities, and of the purposes of religion in society at large, changed profoundly as a result of their interactions with people from different religions and backgrounds.

The training of *rinshō shūkyōshi* heralds a new stage in the process of clinic-inspired care in contemporary Japan, and, in a broader sense, of the progressive psychologizing of religion (see SHIMAZONO 1996; 2007; HARDING, IWATA, and YOSHINAGA eds. 2015). The future of Sendai’s Spirit Counseling Center is uncertain, but the program has met with more success than chaplaincy initiatives have in the recent past, not least because of its affiliation with a university, “the *sine qua non* of social legitimacy in modern Japan” (McLAUGHLIN 2013, 314). The status of Tohoku University as a public university only reinforced this legitimacy. The *rinshō shūkyōshi* training program has since expanded to other higher educational institutions. In April 2014, Ryukoku University, a Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land Buddhism)-affiliated university in Kyoto, launched its own *rinshō shūkyōshi* training program. At the same time, Yoshida Kei’ichi, a Tohoku University *rinshō shūkyōshi* graduate and True Pure Land Buddhism temple priest from Osaka, secured significant revision of the rules and regulations for care providers that enabled Buddhist temples to offer nursing care services in their recognized legal status as “religious juridical persons” (*shūkyō hōjin*) without having to register as a secular corporation, as an NPO, or as a social welfare corporation.¹¹ Tax-related benefits aside, providing care services, such as home care, simplifies the process of starting a care service as a temple, Yoshida argues. While some priests operate private companies, not all have the administrative knowhow or the funds to start a business or operate their temple as an NPO or as a social welfare corporation (interview with Yoshida Kei’ichi, 22 October 2014).

It is thanks to his status as a “clinical religious specialist,” and to the Tohoku University program’s prestige, Yoshida assumes, that this revision went through. In March 2014, Yoshida turned to the Agency of Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō) in Tokyo. Only three months later, the Bunkachō acknowledged his request by specifically mentioning religious juridical persons as possible providers of nursing care services. In July 2014, the Osaka City Welfare Department promptly granted permission to temples to operate nursing services. Saieiji, a True Pure Land temple, is the first in Osaka to offer nursing services as a religious juridical person. Yoshida explains that officials in Tokyo learned about the training of interfaith chaplains from Takahashi Hara, professor at the Department of Practical Religious Studies at Tohoku University, when Takahashi introduced the activities of the Spirit Counseling Center to the Agency of Cultural Affairs on an earlier occasion. It is clear, therefore, that just as networks enabled the festival at Jōnenji, so too have interpersonal connections—in this case between educational and governmental elites—facilitated the advancement of post-disaster religion-related aid initiatives.

A lack of access to medical care facilities remains a pressing issue for practitioners of “spiritual care,” especially in urban areas. Graduates of the *rinshō shūkyōshi* training promote spiritual care in their local communities by forming local initia-

tives and by exploring administrative solutions to open up new *genba* in the public sphere and within the growing home care field. What they learn and practice at Tohoku University, however, is not only connected to clinic-inspired approaches to care. Their training involves lectures that repeatedly refer to *minkan shinkō*, or “folk belief.” This understanding of folk belief remains vague. In training sessions, spiritual care instructors make reference to beliefs and practices that have shaped Buddhism in Tohoku over the centuries, such as prayer rituals (*kitō*) for protection and good fortune, or belief in ghosts (*yūrei*) and ghost possession. The 3.11 disasters catapulted discourse on related beliefs and practices into the media spotlight, as the 2013 NHK *Nakihito to no “saikai”* (A reunion with the departed) has shown (see also PARRY 2014). This influential publication and documentary were informed by the Spirit Counseling Center and its affiliates at Tohoku University, notably Kaneta Taiō, who is the head priest of Tsūdaiji (Sōtō Zen Buddhism) in Kurihara, Miyagi Prefecture, and initiator of the Café de Monk. Constant reference to *minkan shinkō* in the training of chaplains may work to distinguish a clinical “religious” specialist from a nonreligious care provider, or “regular” clinical specialist (GRAF 2016, 174–77). In other words, “clinical” spirituality and “folk belief” may form two interactive and complementary aspects of an emerging working definition for “religion” in post-2011 Japan.

CONCLUSION

The interplay of ludic engagement, earnest commitment, and commemoration are arguably the most important dynamics in long-term disaster relief initiatives, not only for the recipients of care but also for the providers, as both vignettes show. For religious aid providers, leaving their temples or churches for the purpose of engaging in volunteer activities at different temples, or to help those in need in their new capacity as certified “interfaith chaplains,” is a step into unfamiliar terrain that opens up new venues, contacts, and lasting friendships.

Far from being concerned with a search for any imagined real “site of action” (*genba*) in the religious landscape of contemporary Japan, my choice of case studies instead highlights two different points on what is best conceived as a broad spectrum of religious responses to the 3.11 disasters. The closer we look through the lens of practice, the better we can observe how the two case studies relate to one another. We can also begin to understand the extent to which these new initiatives both emerge from earlier precedents and represent changes in local and social contexts. Many aspects of “spiritual care,” for example, are comparable or even identical to what generations of priests have offered as *jinsei sōdan*, understood as “having an open ear and useful tips to help others with their issues in life” in support of their local community. And, as the case of the Spirit Counseling Centers demonstrates, “spiritual care” addresses the fact that these local communities are changing in the course of urbanization and changing family structures. Strikingly, the most successful “spiritual care” initiative trains chaplains far away from Japan’s urban centers, in an area where “traditional” Buddhism and “folk beliefs” are at

the center of attention. The training of chaplains, volunteer activities, and tourism to the Tohoku area offer opportunities to combine activities in support of local communities with the study and exploration of local beliefs and practices. This training initiative, in turn, changes the locale. To trace this change, we have to study religion on the ground before disasters strike, while disasters unfold, and long after the affected areas are no longer in the news.

In this research note, I shared my experience of capturing religious responses to 3.11 on film. I discussed the effects of my work on myself and on others, illustrated ways in which filming a disaster unravels ethical concerns, and introduced the importance of discussing life and work in a disaster zone with informants as a means of strengthening the foundations of fieldwork. My view of the Jōnenji cherry blossom festival in 2015 would not have been the same without this background, and writing this reflection on the experience of filming the vignette would not have been possible without recalling my interactions with scholars of religion who encouraged me to include a first-person perspective in our feature-length documentary. More and more, scholars eschew pretense at keeping a “critical distance” and instead accept self-reflexivity; an academic approach, in other words, is not made more legitimate if the person producing it works to conceal her or his role in the investigation. I realize now that it was I who initially chose to keep a distance between myself and those I captured on film—something I continue to struggle with in my work.

I was encouraged by a group of religion scholars to bring myself into my own work when I screened an early version of *Souls of Zen* in 2012 in my hotel room at the Association for Asian Studies meeting in Toronto. In retrospect, I consider this private film screening as the beginning of a rewarding journey. Being encouraged to include a first-person perspective in our film was most of all a big relief. The exploration of ethical concerns, risks, and fears, as outlined in this research note, has since deepened my understanding of what a disaster does. It is clear, therefore, that just as networks enabled the festival at Jōnenji and advanced the interfaith chaplaincy initiative underway at Tohoku University, so too have interpersonal connections between scholars and I facilitated the advancement of my research. As the example of the Jōnenji cherry blossom festival shows, we need to look beyond doctrinal beliefs and sectarian frameworks to understand how Buddhist temple-connected networks generate action. What characterizes the distinctiveness of these networks is their responsiveness in mobilizing aid quickly, their flexibility in offering a wide range of “mundane” and religious services, and their ability to interconnect otherwise unrelated neighborhood networks via temples as hubs.

Establishing “clinical” spirituality and “folk belief” as two interactive and complementary aspects of an emerging working definition for “religion” in post-2011 Japan allows Buddhist professionals to develop multiple identities as interfaith chaplains, temple priests, or working combinations of both. As training venues for “clinical religious specialists” at universities are limited, however, the interfaith chaplaincy training at Tohoku University enjoys a status of exclusivity without having to necessarily limit the number of graduates. The Tohoku University interfaith chaplaincy model is instead designed to expand, as related training initiatives that

have recently started up in other universities demonstrate. However, as the video illustrates, organizing and completing the training takes time and effort. Participation in the training presumes that trainees do not consider their own religion as exclusive, at least not in ways that would discourage participation in the practices of other religions, or interfaith dialogue in general. This places responsibility and power in the hands of trainees and graduates. They become representatives of their religion within the training program, as much as they become representatives of “clinical religious specialists” in the public sphere, and their new status as clinical specialists also affords them a new public position as representatives of “religion” generally—religion understood in its post-disaster status as coherent with the latest training in therapeutic treatments. As the video indicates, the self-perception of trainees may change in the course of the training itself. Judging by these factors alone, my assumption is that selecting trainees must be a complex, time-consuming endeavor. The organizers of the program are likely not only concerned with the trainees’ religious affiliation, but also with individual understandings of religion, individual qualifications, and leadership skills. Gender and age also seem to play a role. The process of selecting trainees, however, is not open to the public, and thus remains subject to speculation.

Religion has always been subject to negotiation. Taniyama Yōzō understands “interfaith chaplaincy” as what could be described as an adaptation of religion to shifting social norms and needs, especially in urban areas, where more than half of the Japanese population lives. The interfaith chaplaincy introduced in this video reflects the transformation of religion in post-2011 Japan into a phenomenon promoted as a public contributor, as coherent with the latest research on clinical care, and otherwise relevant to a Japan struggling with a rapidly aging population, rural depopulation, and other challenges. Further research should examine these new developments in chaplaincy in practice, by comparing different training regimens, and by asking how this training plays out or does not play out in different local and social contexts on the ground.

NOTES

1. For studies on contemporary Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist responses to social changes, see COVELL (2005); ROWE (2011); and NELSON (2013).

2. Interviews with Takahashi Seikai, 6 May 2011 and 13 August 2011. See also GRAF (2016, 170, 174).

3. Conversation with Takahashi Issei, 8 February 2016.

4. The results of our filming in 2011 appear in *Souls of Zen* (2012) and *Buddhism after the Tsunami* (2013). See <https://vimeo.com/158309233>.

5. On 17 January 1995 Japan was struck by the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake. This natural disaster was followed by a human-made disaster, the 20 March 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by members of the new religious organization Aum Shinrikyō. See also READER (2000) and McLaughlin’s article in this issue.

6. Conversation with Takahashi Issei, 20 February 2016.

7. This particular funeral was not for a parish household member. Family members of the deceased had requested the funeral at Jōnenji only after a different temple in Kesennuma rejected the bereaved for financial reasons.

8. There were 3,407 disaster-related deaths registered by 30 September 2015, (among them 1,979 deaths in Fukushima prefecture), according to a report by the Reconstruction Agency (Fukkōchō) from 26 December 2015. See http://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/main-cat2/sub-cat2-6/20151225_kanrenshi.pdf (accessed 19 February 2016).

9. See TANIYAMA (2016). This monograph offers important biographical detail about the author and explores prospects and promises of spiritual care for medical and religious aid providers.

10. McLaughlin tracks these changes in media presentations of religion and religious aid mobilization after the 1995 and 2011 disasters in Japan in his article in this issue.

11. On temples and the “religious juridical persons law” (*shūkyō hōjin hō*), see COVELL (2005, 7–8). The *shūkyō hōjin hō* of 1951 derives from the legal ordinance on Religious Juridical Persons (*shūkyō hōjin-rei*) from 1945. Temples thereby function as independent religious juridical persons. The law was partly revised after the Aum Shinrikyō incident in 1995 in order to allow for the stricter control of religious organizations by the state.

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